

By Sean Rose, Post-Dispatch Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — Some lawmakers are seeing positive signs as the ink dries on a new auto partnership even as the future of the **Fenton assembly plant** remains murky after the **Obama administration** rejected both the **Chrysler** and **GM** restructuring plans today.

Chrysler formed a deal with Italian auto maker **Fiat** less than an hour after **President Obama** spoke this morning, saying the American company couldn't survive on its own. A federal assessment of Chrysler called for the company to merge with Fiat within 30 days before the White House considered another \$6 billion loan.

**Rep. Russ Carnahan**, D-St. Louis, said the partnership with Fiat would help Chrysler by supplying more fuel efficient engines and could help the Fenton plant as well.

The federal assessment released today listed one of Chrysler's weaknesses as a lack of flexible manufacturing. This may be one strength the Fenton plant has. It was retrofitted in 2007, allowing it to produce trucks, minivans and cars with European specifications.

"There may be some additional cutbacks in the work force and plant closings in this process and we don't know where those will be," Carnahan said in an interview. "But I think the Chrysler plant in Fenton — this is a critical time for them to market the value that they will bring to building a new generation of vehicles today."

Half the Chrysler Fenton plant, located outside **St. Louis**, has been idled since **October**, the rest of the facility has been running on diminished production.

Chrysler said in its restructuring plan last month that it will close **two assembly plants** and **five engine plants**

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. Experts said last month that Fenton was in danger of closing.

Carnahan along with other Democrats in Congress sent a letter to Obama's auto task force last week urging the administration to save the Fenton plant and the 5,000 jobs there. More public support will likely be coming from the federal level soon, Carnahan said.

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